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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

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CH'AN SICKNESS

(Continuation of lecture delivered by Master Sheng Yen
Sunday, June 24, 1984)

I will now discuss two important rules, or precepts which a practitioner should follow in order to maintain a correct attitude toward practice. These precepts are first, to refrain from claiming that one has reached enlightenment, and second, to take enlightenment, or Nirvana as the goal of practice.

It is important that you never say that you have already achieved enlightenment. It may be all right for someone who is enlightened to confirm the fact if he is asked, but he should never boast. You may wonder how to tell when genuine enlightenment is reached. There are two ways. The first is to consult someone whose practice is more advanced than your own. The alternative is to attempt to discern whether your experience is the same as that described in the sutras as final enlightenment. This method is relevant only when the first is not practical, and it is prone to error, since the practitioner may misinterpret the sutras -- a dangerous mistake. The proper approach is through reliance on the traditional explanations of the sutras -- this way you can employ the sutra as an index of your experience. The wrong approach is to use your own experience to interpret the sutras.

As we have seen, it is common for practitioners to make an incorrect association between their experience and enlightenment. Rather than reaching enlightenment, these practitioners become affected by a special kind of pride which often influences serious practitioners. In order to avoid the misconception of false enlightenment, serious practitioners must remain ever alert to such pride. This warning may be understood to be a part of the first precept, above. The discussion of false enlightenment is only pertinent to practitioners who actually believe that they have experienced Nirvana. These are at least serious practitioners. However, someone who makes this claim without ever having had the experience of false enlightenment merely demonstrates that he has not practiced. He is not a serious practitioner.

The second precept, to take enlightenment or Nirvana as the goal of practice, obliges the practitioner to read the sutras and Buddhist literature as much as possible in order to understand the nature of the goal and the path that leads towards it. But do not become bound by the teachings of the sutras so that they become an obstacle to your practice; nor should you simply study the sutras to acquire information and to impress others.

There are two extremes. A meditator may wish for enlightenment so intensely that he may believe himself to be enlightened before he really is. Alternatively, a meditator may give too much weight to what he has read and heard about the nonexistence of enlightenment. He may think, "There is no enlightenment; the Buddha says so, the Sutras say so, my master says so -- everyone who knows about the Dharma says so. In that case, I really don't care about enlightenment, but just the same I will continue to practice." This is not a satisfactory attitude, since the practitioner, because of his lackadaisical attitude, will never be diligent and energetic in his practice.

A goal is as important in the practice of Buddhadharma as it is in any other activity. If a practitioner simply took the attitude: "All right, I will do whatever is necessary when the moment comes, but I don't really care about what happens in the future," he would never achieve anything significant because he would never be prodded towards exceptional accomplishment. We must feel that enlightenment is something to be strived for, to attain. (And this feeling should be intensified by contemplating your present condition of ignorance and your bondage to samsara.) Although the goal is necessary, you must guard against excessive zeal towards accomplishment of that goal. Such an extreme leads to anxiousness, which alone will stifle progress.

There was once a patriarch who said that the practice of Dharma should commence with the paramita of dana: the giving of offerings. It is most important to make offerings to the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha). When the Patriarch made this statement, a man in the audience responded by saying, "The Three Jewels are identical to (my) self-nature. Likewise everything that I offer is none other than my own self-nature. So I use self-nature to offer to self-nature. Then it follows that I offer my whole mind to you. Whatever you want I shall think of and then I shall offer it to you." The Patriarch said, "This is very good, that you offer your whole mind to me. So from this moment onwards, when you eat you consume only the food of the mind; when you drink you drink only the water of the mind; when you walk you traverse only the roads of the mind; when you speak you utter only words of the mind; when you sleep you sleep only the slumber of the mind. When you can do this, you have indeed made full offering to me. However, if this is not possible for you, then you must make physical offerings just like anyone else, otherwise in your next life you will find yourself in the animal realm because of your ignorance." The questioner was not at the stage where he could truly offer his self-nature. He was still in the realm of the illusory mind. Just as for the questioner there were still physical offerings to be made, so with one who is not enlightened, there is still Nirvana to attain, a goal to be reached.

In the next section, I will talk about the ways to overcome the obstacles encountered in practice. Two rules must be followed to overcome any obstacle. First, you must work very hard, and second, you must study with those who have a genuine understanding of the Buddhadharma, and you must be very respectful towards these people.

Vexations arise according to the intensity of practice. The ideal is to quell these vexations at all times. When there are no vexations, you will be able to practice without paying attention to any state of mind or response that may arise. When vexations are present, you must deal with them swiftly. If your practice is strong, you will be able to tell when such disturbances arise, and adjust your practice to block vexations from occurring. If you who do not practice, you will not be able to control vexations: you will not be able to foretell when they arise, nor will you have sufficient means to control them once they do arise. Those of us who fall somewhere in between these two extremes of strong-practice and no-practice may sometimes be able to recognize when we are about to be overcome by vexations. For instance, some people who feel the onset of problems may tell their friends, "Okay, leave me alone for now, otherwise I will be very upset. I may lose my temper or even kill someone." We have all probably had this experience at one time or another.

There are many kinds of vexations. Some are brought about by physiological problems, others by psychological problems. If you know that such problems are about to arise, you can try to stop them from occurring or at least dampen their intensity. If a problem cannot be resolved, you may have to endure it. Inevitably, some will try to escape from their problems.

The easiest type of vexation to recognize before its full arising is anger. Although other types may be more easily hidden (such as greed), anger is not so easily hidden. One past resident of the Center would hit the wall when he was angry, sometimes until he broke a hole in it or injured himself. Because of the pain in his fist, his vexations would lessen.

The best way to tame vexations is to prevent them from arising and becoming strong. Once arisen, they are best tamed by vigorous practice. In such cases the best practice is prostration. After prostration, anger, greed, and (especially) sexual desire will be reduced, particularly if you prostrate until your body becomes tired. Prostration is a very good method that is suitable for everyone.

Thus we have seen that with diligent practice and study you can overcome the obstacles that may fall in your path.

***** NEWS ITEMS *****

- Nov. 8 Shih-fu lectured at Columbia University on "Sudden and Gradual Enlightenment."
- Nov. 11 Shih-fu gave a meditation seminar at Rutgers University.
- Nov. 12 to
- Nov. 14 Shih-fu lectured at the Zen Center of Rochester -- by virtue of the kind invitation of Roshi Kapleau. On the evening of Nov. 14, Shih-fu lectured at the New School.
- Nov. 23 to
- Nov. 30 Shih-fu held a seven-day retreat at the Center.
- Dec. 4 The Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religion has invited Shih-fu to make a video recording of his teaching on Ch'an meditation.
- Dec. 15 Beginning Meditation class (9 a.m. - 5 p.m., \$50). Shih-fu will lecture on "Daily Life and Ch'an" at Toronto University, Canada.
- Dec. 16 At Toronto's Cham Shan Temple, Shih-fu will give a talk entitled "From the Finite Mundane Law to the Infinite Buddhadharma."
- Dec. 25 to
- Jan. 1 Seven-day retreat (beginning at 7 p.m., ending 8 a.m.; non-members \$120; members \$50).
- Jan. 2 Columbia University, 4 p.m., Shih-fu will speak on "Background Theory and Actual Practice in Ch'an Buddhism."

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